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Yell Hound Blues (Book Review)

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***Yell Hound Blues*, by Anne Barngrover '08**

Book Review by Emily Smith

The title of Anne Barngrover's book, *Yell Hound Blues*, immediately anchors the reader in the folkloric reality the poems occupy. According to Barngrover herself, the Yell Hound "is a black dog found originally in Devon folklore, often representing the devil, a demon, or a scorned soul." There are certainly a number of scorned souls who speak through Barngrover's poems who have been demonized by various forces, including former lovers, those who judge the blue-collar Southern culture this book celebrates, and—at one point—even those who uphold the traditional "form" of poetry over compelling content, as illustrated in the striking piece entitled "This Poem is a Real Bitch."

The section titles of the book, "Mouthful of Gimme" and "Handful of Much Obligated," are taken from Bessie's Smith's "Gulf Coast Blues," but they also serve to highlight a sense of give-and-take, of desire, thwarted and satisfied, that pervades a majority of the poems. Barngrover's work paints a vivid image of a working class Southern community, embracing "the hail-broke houses, porches/pockmarked with cans of beer,/ the wood gone dark from the rain/ & wet sawdust of gonna do it later." There are references to several separate locations, including places in Georgia, Louisiana, and several in Florida, but the reader gets the sense that it does not particularly matter the name of the town in which any particular speaker resides, only the town itself, the culture, the triumphs and the tragedies which course through its veins day in and day out. The poems cover a wide variety of experiences, but all of them seem to be in search of "What Lasts"—the title of the first poem in the collection. Through love and loss, hangovers and heartbreaks which change you for the worse or for the better, there are a few things which are constant—and it is these elusive benchmarks Barngrover's speakers seek—and occasionally find.

The poems are an eclectic bunch, often including elements of narrative and even dialogue, but also containing profoundly descriptive moments which force the reader to stand suspended in time and consider the significance a seemingly ordinary object might hold. In "Mmmm My Trashy Love," Barngrover plays with items associated with "low-class" or "trashy" lifestyles and weaves a compelling narrative of a romantic relationship from juxtaposing these seemingly "ugly" and "insignificant" objects which are considered to be of low economic and sentimental value. Her speaker says, "[Y]our hair is a Burger King bikini brawl,/ your skin a Natty Lite that's thrown/against the screen." Often, indications of "culture" are strongly tied to food or rituals and social gatherings which include food as one of their chief components, from "Kraft singles drool/through lumps of grits" to the celebration of "Food Truck Thursday."

Barngrover utilizes a great deal of natural imagery, and in addition to the typical invocations of forests, lakes, and oceans, she includes natural disasters by referencing both a tornado and Hurricane Katrina showing both the peaceful and destructive sides of nature and demonstrating that material possessions are not "what lasts," are not what is most important in a person's life. Most fascinating, however, are the moments when Barngrover juxtaposes natural images with those of human society, as when a black bear is shown to be

"loping down the parking lot/of Taco Bell" or when "[a] tomato plant/spurts form a Solo cup." In the world Barngrover creates, humans' relationship to nature is not solely cooperative or antagonistic; it is complex and multifaceted. However, she does seem to be pointing out that, when the material trappings of civilization and forces of nature are in conflict, nature will always persevere. While all objects representative of or useful in human life have value, perhaps they are not among the things that "will last" through time.

Culture is also coded through religious imagery, as church services represent a particular type of "social gathering," containing a microcosm of the communities in which Barngrover's speakers reside. There are at least two references in two separate poems to a former lover who regretted that the speaker did not "love Jesus more." In one poem, the speaker recalls being in "a church that was made of bones," suggesting perhaps the emptiness of institutionalized religious platitudes. Additionally, these images suggest that, beyond the lofty—and perhaps ultimately empty—words of a sermon lie flesh and blood human beings who have in them the potential to do either good or evil; both "what lasts" and what matters lies in their bodies and their bones.

Though occasionally a phrase falls flat or edges towards the cliché (the speaker of one poem refers to "the way/ he once tried to lace me down/ with his lies"), overall, Barngrover finds strikingly effective ways to express complex ideas, including, among others, love, envy, jealousy, and the cycle of life and death, in deeply personal, concrete, and deceptively simple ways. Sometimes what is absent is more strongly felt than what is present; at one point, Barngrover writes, "This is the world in a splendor/of loss." Indeed, many of her speakers feel a great deal of loss, but all of them seem to possess an inner strength, a will to continue on, that is uniquely human. Though these yell hounds may be scorned, they remain. They will outlast the suffering and strive for something better. Near the end of "What Lasts," the speaker says, "What I know is that the dog/ had worn a broken chain." Expressed through her beautiful verse, Barngrover's speakers vow collectively to break free of their chains, to live on their own terms, and in a world of impermanency, to be "what lasts."